

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learning Environment: Factors that Affect ELT in Ethiopia

Mitiku Garedeu, (M.A.) Addis Ababa Science and Technology University, PhD candidate at Addis Ababa University in ELT

1. INTRODUCTION

The goal of ELT is for the students to be able to interact freely with others: to understand what others wish to communicate in the broadest sense and to be able to convey to others what they themselves wish to share” (Rivers, 1978, pp. 3-4) cited in (Nguyen, H., Warren, W, &Fehring H.,2014).

In Ethiopia, English has been taught as a foreign language for the past many years since modern Education was introduced. The ELT, in our country, has passed through a lot of challenges that arises from different sources. That is why we are not as effective as we have practiced ELT for many years. Concerning this, Hailom and Woldu (1998:439) cited in (Sisay,2013) put that “having passed through several years of learning English beginning from primary grades up to higher levels of learning, subject teachers at the different teacher training institutions in the country are found to be deficient in their mastery of English language.” Another study also shares this idea. Institute of International Education (2012) stated that after completing high school or graduating from university, many of our students do not perform well in English after years of English language studies.

Although Ethiopia has recognized the importance of English for all students, enough emphasis is not given for it. The MoE (2012) contend that students should learn English as a subject in elementary classes; they can be ready to attend their high school classes in English. The MoEalso argues that students can master English by employing methods that enable them to improve their English skills. But,As (Sintayehu, 2015) stated, students’ English language proficiency has not been found to be sufficient enough to help them to study English and other subjects. According to Aberash (2005, 36) cited in the same study, the English language proficiency level of students in Ethiopia is low that it doesn’t allow them to follow their studies during their preparatory school and university. Likewise, researchers such as (EbbaMijena, 2014; Jha, 2014) indicated that there

are lots of complaints on the language competence of many students in our country.

A number of studies have mentioned contributing factors to the slow progress of ELT in our country. Most of the factors can be summarized in one of the following phrases: students related factors, teachers related factors and learning environment factors. This paper tries to critically reflect on learning environment factors.

2. SCHOOL’S RELATED FACTORS

In this section some school related factors which are stated by researchers to affect negatively English language teaching in Ethiopia will be discussed. Factors such as large class's size, absence of audio visual aids, unfavorable classrooms environment, and limited time of period, insufficient resources, and limited testing contents are given emphasis.

2.1. LARGE CLASS SIZE

According to Abdelkareem, O. A. A. (2015), “Large class's size refers to numbers of students who learn in a single classroom.” In large classes, the teacher cannot get in touch with the students at the back, and the students would be in trouble to ask for and receive individual attention. It looks challenging to organize active and creative teaching and learning sessions. Normally, big classes are not suitable to have students walking around or changing pairs etc. Most importantly, big classes can be quite intimidating for novice teachers, (Harmer, 1998:128).

According to Hayes (1997) cited in (Jha, 2014), the ideal number of students in a language class is 30 at most, because only under such a scale can offer enough chances for the students to communicate with each other. In case of Ethiopia, a classroom in a public school accommodates 50 to 100 students, (Jha, 2014). Accommodating a large number of students demands effective classroom which we cannot easily get teachers with this quality. Large class size affects teaching and learning in terms of closer attention, voice quality of teachers and learners, visibility of the board, managing pair and group work activities, etc.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Amare (1998) cited in Sisay (2013) indicated that large classroom is one of the critical problems of education in Ethiopian context that obstruct learners follow up, learners participation, teachers' and learners' communication and feedback in the classroom. Wondwosen (2008) cited in the same study, on the other hand, also found out in his study that large class has a number of problems. He stated that classroom factors such as arrangement of desks, class size, and numbers of tables affect both teachers and students in their teaching and learning process in EFL classes. The above problems that come from large class size seem to be also common in Ethiopian context. Most teachers complain that the large class size hindered them not to know their students and their progress and to make the classroom teaching-learning process learner oriented.

2.2 SEATING ARRANGEMENT

Nunan, D.(1998) cited in Hailu (2008) explains that the traditional seating arrangement was "a teacher fronted one." In these settings students do not express themselves too much. In other settings, lie group or pair work students become more cooperative among each other. They can express their ideas, opinions, and feelings. Seating arrangement in the class depends on the type of interaction that the teacher needs to take during a certain activity. The activity can be group work, pair work, open class or individual work. Another way to arrange their places are according to students level, learning style, needs, personalities, learning styles and relationships among each other. Class room seating arrangement is believed to achieve best learning environment for everybody in the class. The teacher plays important role in determining who sits with whom depending on factors such as the age of the students, weak vs. strong students, shy vs. outgoing students, and personalities and so on. Amanuel(2015) and Sintayehu (2015) found out that the seating arrangement of the schools was one factor that obstruct ELT in our country.

3. AN IN ADEQUATE REVIEW OF CURRICULUM

To begin with its definition, a curriculum refers to "The cumulative practice of organized knowledge, skills, experience, modes of thought, planned learning environment, instructional ends or outcomes, guided experience, an instructional plan, cognitive/affective content and progress, and a technological system of production" (Tanner and L. Tanner, 1980) cited in (Mappiasse,S.S. and Sche,A.J.B.,2014). Curriculum plays a decisive role in the ultimate outcome of the learners. It should meet adequately the interest of learners in order to

familiarize them to learn English innately and enjoyably (ibid.). That is why curriculum designers in our country try their best to come up with a better English language curriculum. However, as Walter and Vilches (2008) cited in(Humphries, S. and Burns, A., 2015) argue that , "Curriculum improvement often ends in failure due to educational policies that are incompatible with the realities of the teaching context, insufficient levels of professional support, and inadequate teaching materials."

An inadequate review of curriculum happens due to designers' mistakes in providing content and substance of what students learn. Scholars such as Jha (2014) contend that the current English curriculum in Ethiopia lacks matching theoretical competence into practice, usage, or performance. Precisely, he said that the English curriculum and the prescribed textbooks are short of authentic and interactive lessons for real communication related to the life of the learners in terms of their indigenous culture, language, real life events, needs, and paraphernalia. Moreover, textbooks prepared by government contain exercises requiring highly structured and low output English production, with the emphasis on reading comprehension and practising target structures. Teachers sometimes lack the time to finish the contents in the textbooks; therefore, they simply focus on either on the grammar or reading activities which they believe they can easily implement them.

In addition, the curriculum is frequently changed breaking the natural hierarchy of the course components especially in Ethiopia. Viewing the ongoing changes in our thought process and perception of the world, a periodic reform in curriculum is needed but it should not be too frequent that the existing teachers may find it hard to bridge the gap between their existing competence and the expected competence at fast pace (Jha, 2014). Review of curriculum should consider comprehensive input, organized scope and sequence of lessons.

3.1. TEXTBOOKS

A text book refers to which the teacher and each student have a copy to be followed systematically as the basis for a language course (Ur, 1991:184).the teachers work according to a syllabus, or according to their own program, using textbooks. A course book provides a clear framework by which teachers and learners know where they are going and what is coming next, so that there is a sense of structure and progress. It also provides texts and learning tasks appropriate to most of the class. Hence in the process of language teaching teachers mostly depend on the text books designed for this particular purpose.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

However, effectiveness of the teaching-learning process can be determined by the contents of the textbooks prepared at different grade level.

In the Ethiopian context, English language teaching is currently based heavily upon textbooks. Most teachers and students perceive the textbook as a vital and inevitable tool for their instruction and teaching purposes (Hailu, 2008). In addition, students in Ethiopia have little chance to use the target language in their daily lives. Thus textbooks undertake a special opportunity for students to practice and function in the target language. Therefore, in many cases students learn what is presented in the textbooks and the way the textbooks presented the lessons.

According to Hailu (2008), complaints have been raised both on the capacity and the limitation of textbooks for guiding students through the learning process as well as the needs and choices of teachers who are using the textbook in the Ethiopian context. The other issue discussed in Hailu's thesis was that the content of the existing textbooks is not in harmony with the learners' current and changing perception of their language learning needs.

3.2 LACK OF CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES THAT ENCOURAGE LEARNING

As Gurney (2007:93) explained, in many classrooms encouraging classroom activities are the key factors that support an effective learning environment. The activities that are used in the class to engage the students must be reviewed, revisited and refocused so that they are constantly drawing the students into an effective interaction with the subject. For example, task based interactive activities normally involve the learners in role play, pair and group work activities, group discussion, presentation, public speaking and so on to accomplish certain task or goal in an enjoyable manner.

The lack of interactive activities in the class is common in EFL classes in Ethiopia. But, the ELT practitioners involve the learners in grammar exercises rather than task-based interactive activities. Hailu (2008) stated that most of the activities are not humanistic and the materials do not provide alternative activities according to the learners' language learning styles. Many of the activities failed to encourage meaningful practice. Meseret (2012) evidenced that most of the instructors agreed that task-based language teaching enhances students' learning but they practiced instructor fronted teaching during the writing classes. Much of the class time is used by the

instructor which actually is against the principle of task-based writing. In other words, the students are given less time to practice writing. The most frequent obstacle to task-based teaching is students' lack of awareness about task-based writing and the excessive use of class time by instructors. Despite its educational benefits in language learning contexts, a task in itself does not necessarily guarantee its successful implementation unless the instructor and the students understand how tasks actually work in the classroom.

3.3 ABSENCE OF SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Supplementary materials refer to computers, pictures, games, audio equipments, video equipments, overhead projectors which are supposed to be available in the language teaching class. Most of language-teaching classes need supplementing to some extent in order to enrich the lesson given for a particular class (Ur, P., 1991). The use of different teaching aids makes teaching/ learning more interesting and it reduces verbal teaching. Absence of teaching aid discourage students participate in cooperative learning. Therefore, it is important to integrate teaching aids with the prescribed course content in order to have a positive impact on the teaching-learning processes which are in EFL classroom by providing conducive learning environment.

With extraordinary improvements in multimedia, we are privileged today to avail simplest to complex ways of language learning and teaching through TV, Radio, Stereo systems, Computer, Laptop, Cellphone, etc. However, these devices are seldom used by the language learners inside or outside classrooms, for example, in Ethiopia. For lack of audio-visual drill, both the teachers and the learners remain deprived of learning and mastering standard pronunciation, knowing cultural hints of the native speakers, and knowing the natural or real communication used by the natives in terms of communicative words and commonly used syntactic patterns (Jha, 2014).

When EFL classrooms lack teaching aids ELT seems ineffective. Most of the public schools in our country do not have sufficient or any teaching aids. In some schools, teaching aids prepared for the sake of teaching English are not available. Others do not have adequate, selective, and appropriate teaching resources. If you visit an English classroom, you will observe the absence of any teaching aids on the walls. Furthermore, schools are simply not provided with relevant teaching resources, including wall charts, flash cards, posters, audio

RESEARCH ARTICLE

and visual aids. In relation to this problem, Amare, (1999:53) cited in Amanuel (2015) stated that lack of access to teaching aids has also been the problem in English class. This is a factor that negatively affects the process of teaching and learning English in Ethiopia.

3.4 Teacher-friendly Tests and or Assessments

Testing refers to measuring the students' ability to check their ability to begin a course or how well they show a progress in a given lesson (Ur, P.1991). Therefore, when teachers want to know the level of their students' performance, diagnose what students lack, or place students according to their capacity, they use tests, quizzes and the like. According to Allen (2010), "Language testing refers to the practice and study of evaluating the proficiency of an individual in using a particular language effectively." Thus teachers do not only practice it they should also evaluate the skill and knowledge of, for example, an English language proficiency of their students in EFL class. Concerning assessment, the following can be cited. "In the context of language teaching and learning, assessment refers to the act of collecting information and making judgments about a language learners' knowledge of a language and ability to use it," (Chappelle and Brindley, <http://languagetesting.info/whatis/lt.html>). By doing assessment, teachers collect information about their students using test , quiz, class room activities, home assignments etc in order to make judgments how well their students perform in a language classroom.

But teacher friendly tests refer to tests which do not demand much effort of the teacher in time of correcting and scoring. This is a common challenge in EFL classes in Ethiopia. Concerning this point Jha (2014) stated the following. Since many ELT practitioners in Ethiopia want to save time during correcting answer scripts, they usually keep out analytical (subjective) questions from the final exam papers and prepare multiple choice questions as they are easier to be corrected by anyone wit in a short period of time with the help of answer-keys. Likewise, writing activities and assignments are not favored during classes as they consume more time in suggesting corrective measures to improve the faulty and illegible write up of the students.

Tebeje (2009), Dagne (2009) Meba (2008), cited in Abiy (2013) reported that in Ethiopia, instructors and students had inadequate knowledge of continuous assessment. Instructors consider it as an extra work load,

which might be interpreted as a negative attitude towards it. Many of the English language teachers did not use continuous assessment. The teachers attributed the failure to practice continuous assessment to the inadequate training they were given. Some of them did not apply it in oral assessment.

Limited test contents or assessments negatively affect on developing effective teaching and students' wash back. When teachers teach in relation to limited testing contents, they will affect on students' learning. For example students do not master English after years of English lesson, since they are forced to focus on the strategies of how to pass the national exams which fail to cover comprehensive tests of English language. Therefore, students' scores usually do not reflect whether students have mastered or not all the language skills required communicating in English. Many of university students' scores look relatively higher but their skills is not as proportional as their scores. This can be due to the limited test items employed in their class rooms.

3.5. TIME CONSTRAINT

Limited time of periods makes activities more difficult to implement teaching effectively. Short time of period enforces teachers to focus on limited teaching techniques. Limited time makes teachers feel pressure to get through curriculum. Therefore, teachers frequently focus on achieving the daily or annual plan set by the school.

Scholars such as Jha (2014) suggested that for mastery of English, learners are supposed to be exposed to English at least 3 hours a day. In the Ethiopia context, one class period is of 45 minutes and the number of period is 5 per week. The total time devoted to English classes in our country, is about 225 minutes or 3hours and 45 minutes in a week which is a little higher than the proposed time for a day. The other challenge is that teachers normally spend as much as 10 minutes in non-teaching activities such as roll-call, arranging chair, table, board, marker pen/ chinks, etc. in each class. Thus, we find that the given time for English lesson or practice per week to the students in our country looks below the expected time for effective teaching, learning, and memory retention. For lack of time, not only students are deprived of individual attention, but teachers also find it difficult to complete the full course within the specified time.

As Sisay (2013) stated the students text book contains large amount of contents which should be covered with in the given year. So, to finish the content of the book with in the limited time, the classroom teachers

RESEARCH ARTICLE

use lecture method instead of using student centered approach and without giving more chances for students to practice the lessons and improve their proficiency. All in all Teachers cannot provide students with adequate feedback, when they don't have enough time; they can not engage students in group works or pair works. Therefore, teachers may not give students feedback; they also find it difficult to maintain advisory roles in limited class time.

4. LACK OF ENGLISH EXPOSURE OUTSIDE CLASSROOM

The amount and kind of exposure to the target language are considered important because they provide opportunities for the language learner to successfully perform the tasks essentially involved in learning a second/ foreign language. According to (Krashen, 1981), learning the language depends on to what extent the input students are exposed to is comprehensible, or learners learn a language by getting exposed to comprehensible inputs. In regard to the teaching and learning of language skills, students' exposure to constant practice is clearly a paramount condition for their mastery of these abilities. But, there is hardly any exposure to comprehensible inputs for our students outside classroom. English language learning is entirely limited to the classrooms. In other words, there are few opportunities for students to practice the language outside the classroom context. Consequently, the students get fewer chances to practice how to communicate their own ideas or intentions appropriately in the real life situations (Amanuel, 2015).

SUMMARY

Many researches indicated that there is serious deterioration of the student achievement English language proficiency. There are many reasons that cause ELT decline in English as a foreign language setting in our country. The first reason is related to school factors. For example many public schools are characterized by large class size which is difficult to implement ELT in relation to the large number of students in a class. Another challenge is the nature of seating arrangements in schools is not moveable easily. Therefore, they are not comfortable to carry out group activities.

In adequate review of curriculum is another category of learning environment challenge. Many of ELT textbooks are not prepared in relation to students' need, real life communicative activities and the like. In addition many of public schools lack supplementary material that is designed to promote ELT. Moreover, ELT teachers usually prefer tests or assessments that can be corrected and scored

easily. What is more, the allocated time for ELT is not enough to have practiced students who do not have exposure to English. Last but not least, our students face challenges in getting environmental support to practice English. Their chance to practice the language is usually limited to the classroom. Therefore, they would not master English easily.

Bibliography

- [1] Abdelkareem, O. A. A. (2015). "Factors Negatively Affecting Teaching English Language at Khartoum Governmental Secondary Schools." Sudan University of Science & Technology: Unpublished PhD dissertation (ELT)
- [2] Abiy Yigzaw. (2013). High school English teachers' and Students' perceptions, attitudes and actual practices of continuous assessment. Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia
- [3] Amanuel Abebe. (2015). *A Study On The Problems That Affect Students' English Speaking Skill: Homecho Secondary School In Focus, SNNPR*. Unpublished MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University.
- [4] Amlaku Eshetie (2010). "Language Policies and the Role of English in Ethiopia." Retrieved on Nov.29,2012, from http://www.besig.org/Libraries/Bielefeld_Docs/Roles_of_English_and_language_policies_in_Ethiopia.sflb.ashx.
- [5] Birhanu Bogale. (2009). "Language Determination in Ethiopia: What Medium of Instruction?" *Proceedings Paper: 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*.
- [6] Eba Mijena. (2013). "The Need for Professional Growth of ELT Teachers in Ethiopia." *Science, Technology and Arts Research Journal*: pp. 160-168. www.starjournal.org
- [7] Eshetu Mandefro and et al. () "Perception of students and English Language teachers towards English Language Instruction: The case of schools in Sidama Zone, Ethiopia." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. Vol. 8 No. 4, pp. 1-9, ©IJHSS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

- [8]Federal Democratic Republic Government of Ethiopia.(1994) **Education And Training Policy.MOE.**
- [9]Gurney, P. (2007). “Five Factors for Effective Teaching”*New Zealand Journal of Teachers’ Work, Volume 4, Issue 2, 89-98*
- [10]HailuAbrha. (2008)“A Study On The English For Ethiopia Grade 11 Students’ Books:The Case of WelduNugus Secondary School–Quiha.”Unpublished MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University.
- [11]Harmer, J.(1998).**How to teach English: An introduction to the practice of English Language Teaching.** London: Longman Limited.
- [12]Humphries, S. and Burns, A.(2015). “‘In reality it’s almost impossible’: CLT-oriented curriculum change.”Downloaded from <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/> at Addis Ababa University Libraries on December 14, 2016
- [13]Institute of International Education.(2012).**Enhancing the Quality of English Language Education in Ethiopia.**Report on a Future Search Conference: Sponsored by the Embassy of the United States of America In collaboration with The Ministry of Education of the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the Institute of International Education, and Ambo University.
- [14]Jha, S.K. (2014). “An Ethnographic Insight into Ethiopian English Education.”Amity University, Gurgaon.Volume2 Issue4.
- [15]Krashen, S.(1981).*Second language acquisition and second language learning.* Oxford: Pergamonpublishig.
- [16]Mappiasse, S. S. &Sihe, A. J. B.(2014). “*Evaluation of English as a Foreign Language and its Curriculum in Indonesia*”: Faculty of Education, UniversitiTeknologi Malaysia, MalaysiaURL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v7n10p113> English Language Teaching; Vol. 7, No. 10; 2014 Published by Canadian Center of Science and Education
- [17]MebratuMulatu.(2015). “*The Status, Roles and Challenges of Teaching English Language in Ethiopia Context: the Case of Selected Primary and Secondary Schools in Hawassa University Technology Village Area.*” Hawassa University, Ethiopia.
- [18]MeseretTeshome .(2012). “*Instructors’ and Students’ Perceptions and Practices Of Task-Based Writing In An EFL Context.*” Unpublished MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University
- [19]Ministry of Education.(2002). The Education and Training Policy and its Implementation. Addis Ababa: Ministry of Education.
- [20]Nguyen, H., Warren, W, &Fehring H.(2014). “*Factors Affecting English Language Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*”: School of Education, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.
- [21]SintayehuTeferi (2015).”*Factors that Affect the Practice of Teaching-Learning Speaking Skills in Group Work: Bole Preparatory School in Focus*”: Unpublished MA Thesis, Addis Ababa University.
- [22]SisayTilahun. (2013). “*Assessing the Challenges of Teaching Speaking Skill in A Large Classroom In Ethiopian Context: The Case Of Grade Nine At Arerti Preparatory School, North Shoa Zone.*” Unpublished MA Thesis in TEFL: Haramaya University